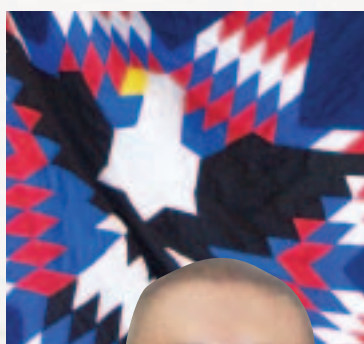


Veterans' Health

**Your key to
better health
in the Midwest**

SPRING 2005



**Reaching out to
Native American
veterans**

**For greater health,
get gardening!**



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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Continuing to bring you better care



Maintaining and improving the health and well-being of veterans is a mission VA Midwest Health Care Network employees take seriously. When leadership selected priority initiatives for the five-year strategic plan, one priority they chose was to improve the quality of health care for veterans by building a culture of continuous improvement.

We are developing the concept in which staff work in teams and continuously improve the way they work. We will use a collaborative learning technique to teach staff a new way of working. Staff from various disciplines will form teams according to the functions they perform. They will analyze data following a defined process, work together collaboratively and respect each other's ideas and contributions to the team. Management will empower teams and ensure they have sufficient time for team meetings.

For the past two years, Robert Bonello, M.D., has led a team from the Minneapolis VA Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU) to improve MICU services. The team's efforts reduced drug costs and decreased the time patients were on ventilators.

As a result of the successful Minneapolis MICU Collaborative, VA Midwest Health Care Network has expanded these concepts to all other VA medical centers in the Network. The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) Quality Collaborative will include ICU employee teams from all the Network's sites, plus an employee team from Loma Linda VA Medical Center. The collaborative's goal is to achieve improvements in quality of patient care, patient safety, teamwork and patient and family satisfaction in the Network's ICU settings.

We will continue to build our culture of continuous improvement. We are proud of the quality of health care delivered in VA Midwest Health Care Network and want to continually strive to provide veterans with the best quality health care.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert A. Petzel".

Robert A. Petzel, M.D.
Network Director

Veterans' Health is published quarterly as a patient education service by VA Midwest Health Care Network, one of the 21 integrated networks of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care and learn about the many health services available through VA. This publication is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor. All articles may be reproduced for educational purposes.

ON THE COVER: VA Midwest Health Care Network recognizes the important contributions Native American veterans have made to their country. On the cover are some of our community's respected Native American vets and their family members.

Keeping a personal health record

GATHER YOUR INFORMATION NOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF LATER

Do you keep better track of your bills than your health? Maybe you have a file folder with your health bills and receipts stuffed into it—lots of us do. But keeping a personal health record can be the most powerful thing you do for yourself. It may even save your life!



Monthly steps log

A simple pedometer on your belt to count the steps you take each day is one of the easiest ways to increase your activity. A pedometer is inexpensive and can be found in a pharmacy or general retail store. Record how many steps you take each day on a calendar. At the end of the month, review your progress. A few small steps each day will add to more control over your health.

Medical records

- **Medication list.** Keep a current medication list and include everything you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs and vitamins. Bring the list to each doctor visit.

- **Medical tests and results.** Keep track of all tests you've had *and* their results, including blood tests and X-ray exams. With your doctor, discuss all test results and their impact on your medical care. By doing so, you can avoid unnecessary additional tests and help your doctor maintain your wellness.

In addition, ask your doctor's office or hospital for copies of all medical records you want to track. Get copies of medical records as you go, including hospital discharge summaries and office visit notes. Also make sure all your doctors communicate with each other and know what the others are doing to improve your health.

Once you gather all your health information, organize it in a system that works for you. Several computer programs can help you store information. If you have access to the Internet, you can create your own online personal health record on www.myhealth.va.gov, the Department of Veterans Affairs My Health₂Vet website designed specifically for veterans and their families. Prefer not to use the computer? A simple binder stored in a safe place will do. It may take a little time and effort to gather your information, but once everything is together you'll be glad you invested the time.

Reaching out to Native American vets

Did you know in some reservations as many as 50 percent of all Native American males are veterans? American Indians have performed military service for the United States for more than 200 years, consistently serving at three times the per capita rate of any other ethnic group.

More than 25,000 Native American veterans live in the 27 federally recognized reservations within VA Midwest Health Care Network's boundaries. In the words of Deacon Tony MacDonald, Seven Dolors Church, Ft. Totten Reservation, these numbers show "when our country calls, Native American veterans are the first to serve."

"VA Midwest Health Care Network recognizes the important contributions Native American veterans have made to their country and has set up initiatives across the Network to benefit these service members," says Robert A. Petzel, M.D., Network Director. Here are some examples:

■ **Native American Outreach Activities Coordinators.** A Native American Outreach Coordinator named at each of the Network's health care facilities coordinates outreach activities to Native American veterans. The coordinators—with representatives from each of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) regional offices in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Nebraska and Iowa—meet monthly via a conference call. The calls, plus annual training, help the staff establish VISN-wide Native American policies and practices.



■ **Traditional Healers.** Sweat lodges—sacred Native American dwellings where spiritual insights and emotional healing take place, long available to veterans at the St. Cloud and VA Black Hills facilities—are being developed at other network facilities as appropriate. In October 2003, VA Midwest Health Care Network executive leadership approved placing Traditional Healers in clinical settings, with the healers either on staff or available for consultation at each Network medical facility.

■ **Clinical presence.** Community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) serve veterans at the Pine Ridge, Rosebud and Cheyenne River Reservations. A residential post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) facility opened at the Pine Ridge Reservation in 2003 to care for Native American vets from all over the nation. Compensated Work Therapy



(Above) Ken Buatala, VA veterans service representative rating specialist, and Peggy Wheelden, VA public affairs officer, display a handmade quilt donated by the Spirit Lake Nation to Fargo VA for hosting the October 2004 VA Compensation and Benefits Fair at Fort Totten, N.D. (Left) The Eagle Thunder Drum Group performs during Fargo VA's fair.

(CWT) programs at Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River help vets obtain jobs with Indian Health Service (IHS) at Eagle Butte, Sioux San and Pine Ridge Hospitals and with private industries. The first CWT program ever established at an Indian reservation took place at Standing Rock in 1996.

Telemedicine helps provide distant care at the Rosebud Reservation and may eventually be offered at other reservation communities. Pine Ridge IHS Hospital caregivers now have access to VA's Computer Patient Records System (CPRS) through a terminal in the Emergency Room area, helping them co-manage patients. VA is talking with Fort Yates and Eagle Butte Hospitals about placing CPRS terminals in their IHS facilities, too.

■ **Tribal Veterans Representatives.** VA Midwest Health Care Network is working with

Tribal Officials and State Veterans Departments to train volunteers to help fellow veterans within Native American communities obtain health care, compensation, pensions, Direct Home Loans and other benefits. These volunteers, called Tribal Veterans Representatives (TVRs), train in VA facilities. The first group, trained in South Dakota in September 2004, will have follow-up training on Lower Brule Reservation in April 2005. Training in Minnesota urban and reservation communities will take place in June 2005. The Network's goal is to offer TVRs at all reservations and in all urban Native American communities.

■ **Veterans Benefits Fairs.** The Network, in cooperation with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), sponsors Veterans Benefits Fairs at all North Dakota and one Minnesota reservations. The fairs offer information about compensation, education, medical benefits enrollment and other services available to eligible vets. Local IHS hospitals provide compensation exam rooms. The reservations provide public affairs support.

VA partners with the Veterans Service Organization, Tribal Leaders and IHS to make these many outreach events successful. The DAV, AMVETS, American Legion, North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs and VFW provide additional support.

VA Midwest Health Care Network leadership and staff remain dedicated to Native American veteran concerns, addressing transportation needs, homelessness, IHS co-managed patient care, post-traumatic stress disorder treatment, cultural competency of caregivers and the transitions of returning Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veterans. These concerns are, and will continue to be, strategic priorities of the Network and the Native American Outreach Activities Coordinators. It is our opportunity to serve those who have served.



lifesaving first aid on the spot. *You do not have to wait to be treated at a VA hospital or clinic.*

If you experience chest discomfort or pain, don't underestimate the significance; call for help immediately. The longer you wait, the less likely treatments will help.

Become more familiar with heart attack warning signs, and learn what to do if you or someone you know experiences these symptoms. Get more information by reading VA's *Time Is Life*

brochure and visiting www.va.gov/cardiology.

If you haven't received your *Time Is Life* brochure, ask your primary care provider for one.



Time Is Life for heart attack

Every second counts when you're having a heart attack, and emergency medical services have the training and equipment to give you

Join the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games

Registration began for the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the world, the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, presented by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA). The Games will take place for the first time in Minneapolis, from June 27 through July 1, 2005.

Minneapolis VA Medical Center and the PVA Minneapolis Chapter will host the event. All U.S. military veterans who use wheelchairs because of spinal cord injuries, certain neurological conditions, amputations or other mobility impairments can participate.

Wheelchair sports can play an important role in the lives of disabled people and leave a lasting



impact. Many newly injured veterans first gain exposure to wheelchair athletics at this event. More than 600 veterans from across the United States, Puerto Rico and Great Britain are expected to compete in the 2005 Games.

We need more than 2,500 volunteers to help with the Games. Please join in supporting our men and women veterans as they compete for the gold, silver and bronze medals. For more

information about how you can volunteer or to make a contribution to the Games, contact Steve Johnson at **612-467-2050** or steven.johnson@med.va.gov. Veteran athletes who wish to compete in the Games should call the PVA sports department for an application at **1-800-424-8200** or register online at www.wheelchairgames.org.

Sow the seeds of greater health: Get gardening!

It's an often-repeated prescription for better health: *Get 30 to 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a day.* So what does that have to do with gardening? Turns out that regularly cultivating your patch of Mother Earth for a half hour or more is just what the doctor ordered.

A 150-pound person can burn about 324 calories during an hour of gardening, according to the American Cancer Society. But gardening does much more than burn calories. It can also lower blood pressure, improve muscle tone and strength, keep bowel movements regular, improve energy and stamina, increase bone and joint function, improve balance and boost mood.

A harvest of health benefits

Other benefits make gardening a smart option to include in your health regimen:

- **Gardening gets you out of the house and into sunlight and fresh air**, which helps you sleep better at night. As long as you protect yourself from excessive exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays, you'll enjoy a mood boost while absorbing vitamin D from sunlight through your skin. Vitamin D helps strengthen bones and prevent osteoporosis.

- **Gardening, like most exercise, relieves stiffness, increases mobility and helps you forget about aches and pains.** Don't let arthritis or other physical problems keep you from



enjoying your garden. Take breaks, switch positions or invest in tools that reduce strain.

- **Gardening may keep the mind sharp in old age**, studies show. That's because adults who perform mild exercise are less likely to experience declines in learning and memory, often early warning signs of dementia.

Best of all, the joys of gardening don't end when the gloves come off. You may find yourself arranging a bouquet of flowers, cooking up a healthy sauce from freshly picked tomatoes or drying flowers for a friend. You'll be moving, thinking or doing, and that beats sitting in front of the television any day.



Health answers

Here are answers to some questions you may have about your prescription medications and refills.

Q What is CMOP?

A CMOP stands for our **Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy**. It's a highly automated center that fills prescriptions and mails them to veteran patients efficiently and cost-effectively.

Q Why can't I get my refills from the Outpatient Pharmacy instead of through the mail?

A The Outpatient Pharmacy gives new medications to patients who have appointments at medical centers. By sending refill prescriptions to the CMOP, it keeps window wait times under 30 minutes, ensures patients receive proper prescription instructions and helps VA reduce costs.

Q Can VA fill a prescription from my local physician?

A No. All prescriptions filled by VA must be requested by VA providers.

Q What is a VA formulary, and how can my local doctor or I find out what's on it?

A The VA National Formulary is a listing of drugs that VA providers can prescribe. It's available online at www.vapbm.org/PBM/natform.htm.

Q My VA provider wouldn't fill a prescription I've long been receiving from my non-VA cardiologist. Why not?

A Not all providers treat medical conditions the same way. To ensure you receive the best care, your VA provider carefully reviews all medical records from your outside provider and, after examining you, may recommend an equally effective alternative drug from the VA National Formulary.

Q Can I get my medications automatically refilled?

A You must request refills. However, sometimes your provider will renew your expired medication. When the Outpatient Pharmacy processes this order, it will send you more medication. This renewal is considered a new order.

Going fishing

Join us for a weeklong fishing trip in a cabin/lodge setting!

Attendees: All veterans with spinal disabilities residing in the VA Midwest Health Care Network service area

Date: June 11–18, 2005

Location: "Veterans on the Lake" resort near Ely, Minn.

For more information, contact Kirt Sickels, event coordinator, at **319-339-7104** or at VA Iowa City Health Care System, 601 Highway 6 West, Iowa City, Iowa 52246.



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